

# POLITICAL NOTES

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## THE STRIKE WAVE

Printing - auto - steel - lumber - coal - oil - elevator workers - retail employees - movie - shipbuilding - longshoremen - Pullman - bus drivers - electrical workers - cotton and textile - utility - copper and brass - all these and many more have been affected by the current strike wave. In Chicago, San Antonio, Detroit, Joliet, New York, Gary, Whiting, Hollywood, Los Angeles, Warren, Canton, Kearny, Montana, Wisconsin, workers are demanding better living conditions. In fact this is the most widespread strike wave that the US has seen for years. Even the 1937 strikes which involved hundreds of thousands of workers hit only a few big places.

"At the height of the sitdown strategy in June 1937, work stoppages called out 475,000 workers; in April 1941, 570,000; in June 1943, 600,000. By contrast, official estimates last week placed the number of workers directly involved at 275,000.

"But today's labor uprising was in one ominous respect more critical. Whereas earlier walkouts had largely centered only around a few industries (1937, Little Steel and automobiles, and 1941 and 1943, coal), the strikes this time were all-enveloping, geographically as well as industrially. From coast to coast, from local enterprises to giant industries, labor unrest reared up sharply."  
(NEWSWEEK 10/8/45)

The working class is restless but it does not know exactly how to express resentment against the wartime speedup and the peacetime letdown. It does not clearly know its class interests. This is shown in many ways: the coal strike in sympathy with the foremen's union; jurisdictional disputes; strike of 700 for Saturday and Sunday off instead of the realizable demand for premium pay in Chicago South Works; mounting race tensions in Detroit, Gary, New York. In each of these cases a clear program of struggle for certain definite working class demands is utterly lacking. Social reformists, centrists, racists, pie-card artists distort and divert class sentiment and prevent a finish fight.

The objection may be raised that the demand for a 30% increase is a program. In reality, however, this demand has been forced on the bureaucracy by mass resentment against wage cuts. It is the leadership's attempt to generalize the already nationwide sentiment among workers for no reduction in take-home pay, for 52-hour pay for a 40-hour week. It does not go beyond this and in many cases lags far behind. There is no drive to extend the scope of the struggle to include better job conditions, closed shop, 30-hour week, strict seniority, etc. In every sense of the word this one demand represents a complete tailing off of the membership. A few years ago the CIO issued a cost of living report which showed a rise of almost 50% in prices of necessities. They spoke then of breaking the Little Steel Formula. Now, confronted with a mass struggle to raise wages, they have adopted a 30% formula, which by their own figures is inadequate to meet the increased cost of living - by now, up much more than 50%.

And even this 30% will be sold down the river. The policy of the

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bourgeoisie and their government is apparently to fight violently against any wage increase of more than 15% and not even to grant that without tremendous pressure. The trade union bureaucracy is preparing to accept this. The oil workers in Whiting were willing to stay out for this 30% - and the international told them to go back. When they held out anyway, the whole weight of the bureaucracy went to work on them, broke their will and had them back at work on the basis of 15%. As a part of this general strategy, General Motors and US Steel turned down the wage demand cold.

Because of this distortion and lack of clearly defined aims, many have maintained that the working class has been peacefully going along. They saw no struggle to lead. Yet the present strike wave did not occur overnight. It has been in the making all thru the war. In 1942 there were 839,961 workers involved in 2,968 strikes. In 1943 this figure was more than doubled, reaching almost 2 million workers in 3,752 strikes. By 1944 the 2 million mark was topped: 2,115,637 in almost 5000 strikes. Tho not all of these were as spectacular as the coal strikes, here is proof positive that this unrest has existed all along. A curious angle has been the shortness of the strikes' duration. Whereas previous to 1942 the average number of days' duration was roughly between 17 and 24, in 1942-3-4, it was 11.7, 5 and 5.6 days, respectively. They were quickies, signs of dissatisfaction for anyone with a class instinct to read. And they pointed to a culmination in the broad strike movement occurring today.

The wartime struggles had much the same character as the present ones - spontaneous, expressed in a variety of incidents, by and large lacking a clear program. Kelsey Hayes is a case in point. For 40 days men held out in solidarity with 3 fired union officials - without organized leadership, or expressing any other demands. A remarkable demonstration of solidarity and determination! And no group in the city of Detroit took the situation in hand and successfully directed this solidarity and determination to the winning of the workers' demands.

To this extent the strike wave proceeds along lines familiar to the bourgeoisie and for which they are prepared.

"The sudden end of the Japanese war caught labor by the short hair. Ever since V-E day last May government stabilization chiefs had been stalling off a revision of wage policy. They might have stalled a few weeks more, but they were prepared to give ground while the Japanese war was still on. With the labor-markets still fairly tight, some significant wage rate gains might have taken place."  
(BUSINESS WEEK 8/25/45)

But not any more, they are resolved. The war's end has taken the lid off and illegal stoppages have become "legal" strikes; but it has also put the bourgeoisie in a more favorable position. They have been following a policy of provocation, hoping to bludgeon workers into line as unemployment grows. The press is conducting a vicious anti-labor campaign. Reactionary veterans' organizations are encouraged. Race friction is stimulated.

Despite this, the very widespreadness of the dissatisfaction holds potentialities that workers will kick over the traces. There have been several sit-in strikes - something definitely not cricket from the viewpoint of property rights. There have also been many cases of class solidarity, refusal to cross picket lines, rank and file pressure on

union headquarters for a more militant policy.

"The war is over." The workers cannot now be told by hand-picked soldiers, generals, newspapers and labor fakers that "you're betraying the boys at the front" when they strike. The cynical suppression of colonial and working class movements - Greece and Java for example - make a laughing stock of the idea that a new world will come from collaborating with the capitalists. The unrest abroad communicates itself to the working class here and stimulates activity.

More and more the proletariat is beginning to realize that the bourgeoisie does not represent its class interests. The hatred and contempt which auto workers have shown for their sellout leadership is not expressed so graphically everywhere. But discontent with the war and living conditions must inevitably include the bureaucracy which has consistently told the workers to swallow the bitter medicine of rising prices, speedup, government intervention.

The growth of industrial unions in the US has brought in its wake this tremendous labor bureaucracy. The organized workers materially support it, even if unconsciously or unwillingly. These professional misleaders have a niche in capitalist society and have no more intention of altering the status quo than the most reactionary scissor-bill. They are a constant drag on the rank and file; they keep it in line and they help to put over the bourgeoisie's policies. Their war record is a case in point: no-strike pledge to the government, failure to organize any effective action against the Little Steel Formula; failure to organize the unorganized; acceptance of maintenance of membership instead of the closed shop. Their ideology is one of collective bargaining, labor and management collaboration, lobbying for "progressive measures." They have a credo of gradualism, or progressing in "slow and orderly fashion."

When Murray negotiates with US Steel for a wage raise he doesn't raise any banner of workers' class interests. He speaks of full production and employment and peacetime prosperity. One would think he was a corporation lawyer arguing in the best interests of the company! His first concern when the wage demands are turned down cold, is:

"our sincere desire that no precipitate action be taken by members of our union which might lead to industrial disturbances." (Chicago TRIBUNE 10/24/45)

When Reuther finally "leads" a strike his plan is for one corporation at a time. Reason for this super-strategy: competition of the functioning companies will force the struck plants to come to terms. Not the action of the workers, mind you, but their employer's business rivals will accomplish the union demands! Instead of working class solidarity, "conjunction of interests" between the workers of one plant and employers of another. And it could be done so peacefully too. Of course, Reuther has never heard of employers' associations, trade associations, the common class interests of the bourgeoisie. He's not fighting a class enemy, he's "collectively bargaining" with a legal entity - a corporation. He doesn't care to lead auto workers, regardless of their place of employment, in a common struggle for a general wage increase. He may be head of an industrial union but workers at Ford's or Chrysler's need never know it!

With such a policy the bourgeoisie feels its interests are well protected.



"Detroit labor leaders do not intend to cripple Ford, General Motors, or Chrysler with a major strike. Instead, individual unionists talked of helping Ford regain its Number One position in the low-price field, believing that when it did the workers would receive major concessions, such as a guaranteed annual wage.

"...As one UAW official put it: 'What sense is there in pulling big strikes when you have a lot of people out of work?'" (NEWSWEEK 9/17/45)

"Although union leaders now consider the no-strike pledge to be dead, few have given rank-and-file locals a go-ahead to strike when they please. Instead, a policy of restraint is urged... Stress is being laid on the importance of respecting agreements against striking during the life of a contract." (UNITED STATES NEWS 9/21/45)

Federal government policy has been to sit back and let the employers take the stage. There is no war on now, a strike wave of sorts was inevitable, they feel, and the best thing from the viewpoint of capitalist interests is to let the individual bourgeois fight it out using the usual means - city police, state militia etc. Of course where profits are seriously threatened - as in the oil strike - the federal government steps in. The WLB is dead. The bourgeoisie is even chafing at the Smith-Connally Act which they put thru during the 1943 coal strikes. It seems that arbitration is compulsory and while this was all right for striking workers, they don't want to be tied down to any one method of slugging it out. Also, the election machinery established by the Act has not adequately served its purpose. Strike votes are steadily mounting, the number has jumped from 142

"Such a one-sided sentiment in favor of striking was not anticipated by Congress when it passed the legislation establishing election machinery. Sponsors argued that workers were being misled into striking by union leaders, that the average worker would vote against striking in wartime if given a chance to do so by direct ballot." (UNITED STATES NEWS 10/12/45)

The working class today faces a further drop in living standards, a general worsening of conditions. They can arrest this tendency by militant action. However, to accomplish even this, they must shift from the defensive to the offensive. The 30% wage demand at best would raise pay to where it was at the war's end. But in 1945 wages were already lower than in 1941 - i.e. the workers are asking for restoration of a wage which will not be as much in terms of commodities they can buy, as the wage at the beginning of the war!

The strikes must sweep past the restraints of the leadership, they must include all the workers involved, they must have independent centers. The bureaucracy fears this as much as does the NAM. Beginnings can be made now by formation of strike committees to lead the struggles, rank and file committees to frame bold demands, progressive groups to direct and coordinate these activities.

Such a policy could force wages up. But the bourgeoisie would thereupon proceed to increase the exploitation of the workers, extract more surplus value from them. Wages and profits are mutually antagonistic - one rises or falls in relation to the other. Since the worker is paid out of the value that he himself produces and since the boss takes his profits from that same value, there must be a constant strug-

gle on the part of each for a larger share. The overall tendency is for wages to fall relative to profits. In the present period of declining capitalism, the fall in wages becomes absolute - living standards go steadily down. Capitalism loses all justification for being. Strike struggle alone no longer suffices to achieve better standards. In the words of Marx:

"At the same time and quite apart from the general servitude involved in the wages system, the working class ought not to exaggerate to themselves the ultimate working of these everyday struggles. They ought not to forget that they are fighting with effects, but not with the causes of those effects; that they are retarding the downward movement, but not changing its direction; that they are applying palliatives, not curing the malady. They ought, therefore not to be exclusively absorbed in these unavoidable guerilla fights incessantly springing up from the never-ceasing encroachments of capital or changes of the market. They ought to understand that with all the miseries it imposes upon them, the present system simultaneously engenders the material conditions and social forms necessary for an economic reconstruction of society. Instead of the conservative motto: 'A fair day's wage for a fair day's work!' they ought to inscribe on their banner the revolutionary watchword: 'Abolition of the wages system!'" (VALUE, PRICE & PROFIT)

These strikes, tho, do contain the potentiality of at any point taking on broader political implications - as when the navy and government move and the workers want to continue their struggle against the troops, or when sitin strikes, a form of occupation of the factories, occur. As soon as a strike becomes city-wide or nation-wide, some form of workers control is introduced. In a general strike the working class is forced to assume political functions. Those organizations which have prescribed an exclusively economic path of development for the proletariat will find themselves confronted by something totally unexpected.

The Trotskyites support Frankenstein for mavor of Detroit and build presidents' committees in the UAW. The Stalinists bait Reuther for favoring a strike. Reuther, a Socialist, is for "one at a time" and 15%. Were the situation in Detroit or any other highly concentrated industrial city to assume proportions of a general strike, all these gentlemen would be completely taken by surprise and would do their mightiest to confine the struggle to good, conservative trade union channels. They do not have, in short, a perspective of abolishing the wages system. If capitalism has lost its justification for existence, then surely these outfits which go along with capitalism have also.

In these class battles with the bourgeoisie, workers will enrich their experience and capacity to learn, as well as win some concessions. But they cannot by themselves throw off narrow, reformist ideology. That is a task for revolutionists.

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ON THE BRITISH DOCK STRIKE

From the Aug. 11 issue of the British publication, WAR COMMENTARY - FOR ANARCHISM. we reproduce excerpts showing conditions of the London dockers. They've just been striking for a raise from \$3.90 to \$5 a day and have tied up the port of London, except for unloading done by troops

"Nearly everyone will be aware that the dockers have, for some time, been working at a very heavy pressure...The rate of work was intensified during the preparations for the invasion of Europe, after D-day and right up until V.E.-day.

"Dockers with whom I talked told me that this involved being virtually 'locked in on the job' for 13 to 16 hours a day, with no opportunity to stop for normal meals...The reward given for their herculean efforts...was a Second Front Agreement under which they were paid 2s. 6d. per ton for unloading, plus the lavish praise and sickening back scratching of the press and the T.U. bosses. This Second Front Agreement was suddenly broken by the employers at the end of May. ...The dockers...now received a slash in their pay packets of approximately 60s. a week. J. Donovan, T. & G.W.U. national secretary, Docks Group, admitted that 'the docker now finds himself in a worse position financially than the workers in industry generally.' He goes on to say 'the dockers' basic wage of 16s. per day represents a rise of only 23% during the war and was the lowest of any industry.' According to Bert Aylwood of the Docks Progressive Committee, this is approximately the same wage paid to dockers 25 years ago. Faced with the position of having the Second Front Agreement smashed by the bosses, which meant reverting to the low wage level, the dockers...reverted to a normal rate of working.

"...Members of the Docks Progressive Committee told me they were aware that this was merely a continuation of the struggle that these men were carrying on for years before the war. Everywhere I found a lack of confidence in the T.U. leaders. The demand from the trade unions that the dockers must return to work on the bosses' conditions before negotiations will be started, is bitterly resented. Dick Barratt, general secretary of the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers Union could not even find a seconder at a meeting of dockers on the 24th July for a proposal that the men should return to 'normal' work. The efforts of the T. & G.W.U. have been as abortive.

"The complete solidarity of the stevedores and dockers is much in evidence. Hundreds of these men have put up a struggle over ten weeks - a struggle not only against the bosses, but also against a combination of the Ministry of War Transport, the National Dock Labour Corporation, L.C.C., Port of London Authority, and T.U. officials... One of the major weaknesses of the dockers was openly admitted...All the other essentials for solidarity are there, but with some men in one union and the rest in another, and within each union the workers divided and sub-divided into differing groups, a condition of confusion arises....

"Efforts to break the will of the dockers by bringing in soldiers proved to be of no avail. It only succeeded in a further withdrawal of labor...Both the men and their committee expressed to me their sympathy and understanding for the soldiers' circumstances. The soldiers were acting under orders...Some of these soldiers were far from happy. One group told me that this is not the first time they have been used for strike-breaking...Obviously there was an attempt by the authorities to put up a ban on fraternisation. There were nearly as many police and red-caps outside the dock gates as there were dockers. This did not prevent the dockers from having a whip-round for cigarettes for the soldiers...The dockers are...asking who is behind the decision to use the troops. They could no longer blame the Tories..."